

September 15 2013

**Scripture Lessons** *Exodus 32:7-14*

*Luke 15:1-10*

**Sermon** **Joan Sulser**

It is a real treat to be with you all today. About a million years ago I knew Deb Allen, one of your former ministers back in Wisconsin. She and I were ministers together at a minister's conference. I remembered when she first interviewed out her with you and about how excited she was to be coming to serve you. She called me and she said Joan, "they are lovely people and they have trees." And now the Capital has recognized you and you do have trees. So you are going to have the White House Tree, the National Tree and that is pretty darn exciting. She didn't tell me what a beautiful place this is. It is an extraordinary lovely place and I know that as a congregation you all do a lot and are very, very active in the community and so it is just a privilege to be with you and to know you just a little bit. All these years, I have been holding in my heart and thinking and wondering what Newport UCC is like so when I moved to Spokane five years ago because of my husband's job, I thought that one of these days I would get an opportunity to go up to Newport. So here we are and it is just a delight to be here.

You know there are some people who have a hard time keeping track of things, you know what I mean before they can leave the house, they have to search everywhere for the car keys. And they make it out to the car and they realize they do not have their wallet and so they go back into the house for another search. Sometimes the wallet or car keys are in the basement; sometimes on the dresser; sometimes they are in a pocket; sometimes on top of the refrigerator; and sometimes they are by the front door. And lots and lots of time goes into looking for those essentials of life.

I am not that kind of person, my husband is but I always I know where my stuff is. So rarely do I misplace something but when I do the memory haunts me. A few years ago I missed misplaced by sunglasses and I was distraught. I know this sounds extreme but I stopped everything I was doing. I looked in all the places where I sat in the house. I looked in my purse. I drove to work, I looked in my office and I looked again in the house including the places where I don't usually stash stuff just in case. And I was near tears. Now for some that is over dramatic. The issue was they were expensive sunglasses and I would have to pay to replace them. But the worse, it was my identity. Because I am not the kind of person who misplaces things so in order to be true to my identity I had to find those sunglasses.

I couldn't become one of those other people. I had to keep from being one of those people who doesn't lose things. When I finally found them, I rejoiced because I felt like I was myself again. I didn't lose them. They were right there so I can relate to the woman in Scriptures who loses the coin and the shepherd who loses his sheep. I can understand that need to look for what you want.

Jesus said that God is like that in the right way but not in the way that I am. God seeks those who are lost and brings them home and God restores them to a place in the community. God rejoices when the lost are found and God does all of this with great extravagance, with great extravagance, reckless love that searches and seeks without tiring. Extravagant love and reckless love that rejoices and requires others to rejoice. Jesus asks which one of you if you have one hundred sheep and one strays from the flock that will not leave the ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness vulnerable to wolves, wandering off and all manner of mischief. The shepherd will beat the bushes until you find one lost sheep. You would put that sheep on your shoulders just if you were carrying a newly found child and when you see your friends you would cry out "Come party with me, I found my sheep" and will do a happy dance. And which one of you would be like the woman who lost her quarter. You would not be like that woman and rip up all the carpet in the living room, move all the furniture out into the front yard and move all the heavy appliances out of the kitchen into the front yard and search the front yard. And when you found that quarter and when she found the quarter she runs out into yard and calls everybody up and down the street. "Come party with me, I found my quarter". And now which one of you would not do that?

And which professor among you if you have a student who is having trouble in introductory physics. Would you not cancel all of your appointments and projects for the coming semester and go and search out the student in the dormitory and spend every evening and late into night working with that student and so on the day of his exam, the student makes an A. And when that student makes an A in all your departmental you would say, "Come party with me because the one that was an idiot in physics has now made the best grade in the class." Would you not do that? You know the answer, none of us would do that but God does. God goes out searching and seeking even though the search makes no sense by human standards. God seeks because it is God's nature to seek until the lost is found.

The focus in today's parable is not on repentance but the focus is on God's seeking. The focus is not on how to seek the coin that was lost or how badly the sheep felt about being lost and swore that might ever get lost again. The focus is on how thorough and how extremely searching and how overwhelming the joy is. We call this the parable of the lost sheep but it isn't really, it should be the parable of the searching shepherd. We call this the parable of the lost coin but it isn't really, the parable is about the sweeping woman. God acts because God has a

sentimental attachment for God's people. And God loves us whether we deserve it or not. We are precious in God's sight. God will not write us off or disregard us, no matter how foolish or lost you might be. I think it breaks God's heart when he sees someone drifting off course and wandering in the wrong direction heading down paths of destruction and not even knowing they are lost. So God goes out looking and calling for the lost soul. When God recovers the lost, God rejoices and all of heaven rejoices at the amazing grace of God that we see and we celebrate. This joy of God is at the heart of the Gospel and it is great news for those who are lost but it is also the defense of the Gospel because there is something in us that wants punishment of the sinner. Somehow that must grit with Jesus. Where is the saying, I am sorry and I am never going to do it again. And I know how much I hurt you. Where the awareness of how much trouble has been caused but Jesus doesn't think about that way. Now Luke I think couldn't quite stand leaving it at that gracious and so I think Luke put words in Jesus' mouth and Biblical scholars and we can argue about it until the cows come home. But Luke kind of wraps it up by saying there is more rejoicing in heaven about one sinner who repents. But remember we are not talking about repentance. We are talking about a coin that is going to roll its self into the open. It is about God that seeks and rejoices.

Luke tells us that the strict religious leaders were upset because Jesus was eating with "those" people. After all it is one thing is to pray for them or preach for them or give them handouts but Jesus was eating with them and with prostitutes and with government informers and spies, with the terrorist, with the scum of the earth and it looked like he was having a good time doing it. It sure looked like Jesus was eating with them because he liked them not out of a sense of duty or trying to reform them. And the Good God-fearing Jews were appalled with that kind of behavior. Truly if Jesus was a godly man he would denounce those people and their life style. Surely if he were a godly man he would avoid them and associating with them but Jesus said that is exactly what God does. God associates with the lowest forms of humanity; God reaches out and gathers us in. Whether they got lost deliberately or accidentally, whether we even realize we are lost God will come to us and the right time God loves us for us but we can't do it by ourselves

I think the super pious in creditable religious folk who criticized Jesus that they lost sight of their own lost being and their own need for God. They saw God as a lot of us as a cosmic book keeper who keeps records of everybody and when we don't do things right won't bother with us anymore. They assume they were on the assents side of the ledger. You know in this parable of the sheep Jesus never goes back and talks about the 99 sheep and so some writers think the 99 is a set up and although Jesus divides the sheep into two groups of one and 99. He was not trying to make two different groups 99 who don't get lost and don't need God and

the one that does get lost and needs God. Instead the meaning is, the one lost one is the whole human race as we really are. The 99 sheep that never get lost are the whole human race that we think we are. The one lost sheep stands for all of us and the only thing that separates us and the only thing that the God-character is interested in, is going after the lost. Going after the lost; going after each one of us because each of us, no matter how much we try to do what is right; we get lost; and each of us strays from in God's will and each of us stuck in a small dusty place and God comes looking for us in Jesus Christ in the still small voice in congregation assuming for community for all. Jesus said rejoice, rejoice with God when a lost is found, rejoice with the angels when God brings someone home. As Christians we are called to share this Good News- God each one of us; each one of us is precious in God's sight. God goes out searching for us before we even know we are lost. God searches for us and does not give up, ever gives up on us . People hunger and thirst God's amazing extravagant toward us As Christians we are called to rejoice with God and all of heaven when the lost are found and so we can give a happy dance and sing with joy rejoice because God transforming love does bring new life. Let us praise God for God's faithful, searching seeking untiring love. Amen